



K SERA SERA SERA: WOMEN HEROIC ACT SCULPTING CHIPKO PHILOSOPHY IN RAINNE-LAATA

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ABSTRACT

Abstract: Chipko has been considered an environmental movement to protect the trees in the Himalayas. So far, a lot has been said about this movement and that has brought a clash of perspectives, giving rise to movement sometimes as Conservation or at times a Local or often as a Women movement. Well, the collected data tells that there is still a gap between public understandings of the 'Chipko' as a Movement. This paper focuses on the women's perspective reflecting their initiative, coincidentally, taken in the Rainee village that brought Chipko to life.

KEYWORDS: Environmental Movement, Tree-hugging, Gaura Devi, Forests, Himalayas, Symbolic.

INTRODUCTION:

Even after its multi-faceted identity 'Chipko' emerged as an anti-deforestation movement in the early 1970s in the Garhwal region of the Indian Himalayas. International ecologists saw Chipko as a cultural response to the people's love for their environment (Mawdsley, 1998). Groups of environmentally conscious volunteers that worked in different parts of the world and the affected people who reacted via such movements are known as Environmental groups. Environmental Movements have been considered as the movements of groups which were environmentally conscious to challenge environmental degradation to work at the national, international levels and local levels (Sastri, 2017).

Initiation of the environmental movements was all about people's rights over natural resources in India and even in Uttarakhand, be it Doli-Palki (1913), Tilari Jan Andolan (1930), Kuli begar (1916), University Movement (1972), Anti-liquor (1815), or Chipko (1973) Movements started as people's movement rather than environmental in the State. In attempting to draw attention to the difficulty of sustaining their livelihoods in the region, local communities engaged in protest by hugging trees that were marked for felling in state-owned commercial forests (Heaslip, 2005). Chipko was popularized as a feminist movement as village women became the first victim of forest destruction. Women were directly dependent on the forests and it was their dependency and concern that made people realize the significance of trees in their life. Forests acted as a personal space for mountain women where they meet each other collect fodder and fauna, discuss their daily life problems and spend time together. Besides, forests were the primary source of motivation, energy, and a medium to look forward in life for them. Eco-feminists argued that women are therefore closer to nature and more ecologically conscious. This paper contributes to the study of the role played by women in the making of the Chipko movement. The aim of the present paper is to highlight the remarkable step been taken by a group of 28 women at Rainee village on March 26, 1974, that remarkably speeded up Chipko as The Movement.

MATERIALS/STUDY AREA:

The data has been collected from the residents of the village Rainee, Laata, and adjoining areas near Joshimath, Uttarakhand. Uttarakhand has had a struggling past with it for being rich in natural resources. It was always seen as the revenue generator that motivated everyone who ruled there, right from the colonial control to the government and policymakers, to use nature's properties. Given the background of slow life and relaxed people who were totally dependent on natural resources for their daily needs, villagers' always wanted to protect their forests and stop tree felling but the same time they were not wanting to be in any kind of stress.

Conflicts over natural resources were not new but such movements have added a new aspect to the on-going struggle by articulating the issues in terms of survival of the majority dependent on nature. Trees and plants have been associated and identified as Gods in Uttarakhand. Chipko Movement which heralded the people's resistance for control over their sustenance resources was a movement by the local people particularly women in the hills of Garhwal to save their forest from commercial felling.

METHODS:

The data has been gathered using Schedule with a set of open-ended questions in it and analyzed by percent analysis. Observation, Interviews, Schedule, and review text/document are the used techniques in the study. Observations collectively acted as a way to understand the movement related to manifestations. Literature provided insight into the way the movement articulated the issues and

mobilized people. Schedule worked as the best method inviting a face to face interaction of oral-verbal question and answers. The information has been gathered from the local residents of the town of Rainee, Lata, Peng and nearby areas. The data has also been collected via newspaper/magazine clippings, clicking pictures and observations.

DISCUSSION:

Forests, like other places of nature, are dialectically constituted by local politics of place, history, and ecology and are constitutive of social relations. Forests are more than a source of fuel or a 'natural resource', they shape myriad social relations that are locally specific and respond to the ecological and geographical contexts of a place (Gururani S., 2008).

The significance of trees and forests was not something that needs to be explained to the mountain dwellers who themselves were dependent on them but when these sources of livelihood got disturbed by the outsiders, villagers' socio-economic conditions were hampered and this brought them collectively to think over.

Mountain women have played a significant role in environmental movements but hardly received their outstanding credits. Drew in his study argues that despite their active participation in saving the forests, disparity towards women was always visible. Noticeable and renowned personality Medha Patkar contributed along with the tribal women during Sardar Sarovar Hydroelectric project at Narmada River. Although Patkar received national and international attention for her sacrifice, not the collective efforts of women gained deserving recognition (Baviskar 2001). Women's concerns and grievances were mountain specific as they were closer and dependent on nature. That made obvious for women to participate in the movement but the men who rose to national prominence downplayed their roles and subsequent absence of any acknowledgment of women's role puts it all in ambiguity. Women's concerns for river Ganga differed from men as they were worried about their daily access to the river water, maintenance of cultural and religious rites in the river and dam may turn water dead consequently would lessen the spiritual vibrations of the sacred space of the river (Drew, 2014). Mutual dependency and the relationship of women with the environment need to be maintained to fulfill the daily needs of the family. Beckwith study interprets that nonviolent tactics had their background in the women's non-violent collective action. Women rely more on collectivist, nonviolent tactics and strategies (Beckwith, 2002).

In Hills, people usually live peacefully with the forests so several questions like where would we stand without the jungle, what would happen to cows, family (ies), houses and everything as they depended on the trees and forests for their daily needs popped up and bothered them. A number of discussions and meetings held at the local level with gram Pradhan Shri Jagat Singh and Mahila Mangal Dal president Manguli Devi. In fact, for one meeting, hundreds of people assembled at a bridge in Rainee area that roped the way to a series of meetings, rallies, and procession at regular interval. Traveling through buses to Joshimath (Traveling via bus was a triumph those days) and conducting protest to save forests was an obsession for village people who still remember one of the statement of Manguli Devi's motivating speech "Ham apne jungle mein ni jaand dete hai, hamare jungle mein puyana hote hai" (We won't let our forests go just like that).

Rainee has two parts in it 1) Malli Rainee and 2) Talli Rainee. Rainee was lumbermen's favorite spot as they had an eye on 2500 trees for the long time. Rainee residents always had the idea about this. Keeping this in mind comrade Sudama

Singh proposes that Rainee village will lead Chipko Movement and, as a result, unanimously Gaura Devi was appointed as the President of Rainee village. The procession, protest, hunger strike, rallies was a regular event during the time period but it was women who did a wonderful task at the critical time as 27-women under Gaura Devi's leadership has changed the Chipko's history.

It was all about the women's concern and dependency that brought them close to understanding the significance of trees in their life. Be it Rainee or the nearby villages, women shared the same dependency level towards trees, and forests acted as the meeting joints for these young women who were not only dependent on forests for fodder and fauna, herbs, etc. but also to spend some time together discussing house-hold problems. Forests were the main source of motivation, energy, and a medium to look forward in life for them.

Being a movement against the existing rules of the then government of allowing cutting trees by the contractors from the other part of the State, Chipko was a confrontational movement that raised a genuine concern of local mountain residents' dependency on the forests for fulfilling the daily needs. This was foreseen by the CPI M leader Govind Singh Rawat, the real force behind the Chipko, who alarmed local people for protecting trees and forests and warned the local contractors about the future crisis due to cutting forests. However, his sentiment was never understood by local contractors.

Timber was the source of income for these local contractors. It was when outsiders (read contractors) started coming to the mountains for timber that turned the local contractors a little tensed and worried as unlike outsiders the local contractors did not have polished and advanced tools that stopped them to cut the big quantity of trees. Also, they considered forests their own and did not appreciate this step of outside contractors. Soon this realization and anxiety brought most of these local contractors to collectively agree on 'Jungle is ours and shall remain ours'. It was then the Chipko philosophy evolved. Concern and sentiment towards forests and trees were beautifully expressed by the term Chipko which meant to protect the trees even at the cost of one's life (one shall fix him/herself to the trees so strongly that even if the ax falls on the tree it first cut off the human body part than touches the tree).

Chipko has its history though as studies say that the Bishnoi people of India's Thar Desert inspired the environmental movement tactics as in defense of the sacred Khejari tree in 1730, a local woman, Amrita Devi, wrapped her body in an embrace around a tree. When she refused to move, the Maharaja's men chopped through her body to fell the tree. Her actions further set the groundwork for the Chipko movement (Kedzior, 2006). For a local mountain dweller Chipko was a response to their basic questions like what would happen to them, how would they built their houses, cutting forests will result in landslides that further raise a question on the existence of the mountain flora and fauna.

All these questions were popping up in the minds of residents who had a deep-seated suspicion of the outsiders and the distant governments that they see as trying to steal their forest resources, particularly women who had a special attachment with their forests were worried about protecting them.

The whole area of Rainee, Laata, Peng, and adjoining areas was tensed and wanted to stop the activities of outsiders in their forests. Mainguli Devi, Pradhan of Laata Block then, and residents were concerned for Rainee that falls between Tapovan and Laata and where there was a wide range of timber. In case if some outsiders come to Rainee, there was no way to communicate from Rainee to Laata to Peng. It is to be noted that even now there is no public transport between Rainee, Laata, and adjoining villages. Either one walks down or depends on the mercy of the taxi owners or the vehicle owners in case of emergency meetings or sending some confidential information.

Unlike today (mobile phones) there was no medium to transfer the information from one village to another but to walk heavily. It was felt that to play safe and protect forests it is essential to keep adjoining villages in the loop. For the same, one chairperson needs to be appointed in every village (big or small). Rainee was rich in timber and also one of the first accessible villages so it was decided that someone should be appointed in Rainee with an immediate effect as the caretaker (adyaksh) of Rainee village who takes the responsibility to send information further to Nautiyalji, Hyat Rawatji at Tapovan so that the information travels faster to Joshimath and people one can face lumbermen, whenever they come, collectively. This was decided and implemented by appointing Gaura Devi as the President of Mahila Mangal Dal of Rainee village. Among other responsibilities, the Dal had to be vigilant about the protection of forest cover.



Fig. 1

One Incident:

It was not a usual morning on 26th March 1974 when all the male residents of Rainee village and adjoining areas were called at Chamoli district to receive a pending payment. They all went to Chamoli and soon after that Gaura Devi came to know that contractors were coming to cut down the trees at her village. It was quite evident and Gaura Devi understood the conspiracy behind as entire male residents were gone and contractors were coming on the same day. Gaura Devi understood that she needs to take a lead and save forests. On being alerted, she quickly mobilized 27 women including married, unmarried, and even of old age to come together.

Women under the leadership of Gaura Devi moved to the forests climbing hills and reached early as contractors were coming from a long road route. Meanwhile, as this group could not figure out the best they can do in a short time of period, Gaura Devi asked everyone to destroy the cliff way they were coming from.



Fig. 2

These 28-women and young girls: 1. Smt. Gaura Devi 2. Smt Bhadi Devi, 3. Smt. Bhatti Devi, 4. Smt. Gomti Devi, 5. Smt Bati Devi, 6. Smt. Chandri Devi, 7. Smt Sauni Devi, 8. Smt Gauma Devi, 9. Smt. Harki Devi, 10. Smt. Uma Devi, 11. Smt. Rupsa Devi, 12. Smt. Duka Devi 13. Smt. Ukha Devi 14. Smt. Uma Devi, 15. Smt. Chiladi Devi, 16. Smt. Moosi Devi, 17. Smt. Falguni Devi, 18. Smt. Gauma Devi, 19. Smt. Maita Devi, 20. Smt. Kooni Devi, 21. Smt. Maita Devi, 22. Smt. Belamati Devi, 23. Smt. Kalee Devi, 24. Kr. Jhooti Devi 25. Kr. Bali Devi 26. Kr. Maingulu Devi, 27. Smt. Indri Devi, 28. Smt. Tulsi Devi destroyed the route breaking cliffs. They broke down the dangerous cement bridges leading to the forests and sat down on the rest stopping the lumbermen. In Hills it is called 'lungerkauno' (handicapped corner) that stopped the lumbermen to proceed. This group of 28 women stood in the way of these lumbermen and stopped them in this manner. The route was destroyed completely and on the rest, they sat together and collectively confronted the government officials and laborers who came to cut the trees. Women asked them to leave immediately as the route was destroyed and they cannot move ahead and, even after this, if they wish to move ahead they shall kill all of the 28 women. It was a daring step on women's part as they were just 28 whereas lumbermen and officials were in the hundreds.

The sentiment behind the entire episode was "Forest is the source of our livelihood and we won't let our forests go just like that". The women refused to move out of the way of the lumbermen and soon they moved away. Soon after this, the official and lumbermen moved back and this entire episode became a remarkable

step in the history of the Chipko Movement that changed the direction of Chipko. This incident decided the fate of the Chipko Movement. It was a successful endeavor and boosted the morale of residents.

RESULTS:

Indeed, hugging or embracing trees can easily be interpreted as a symbolic act but as evident, initially, Chipko was not a structured movement that formally announced their plans and strategy mobilizing people but kind of confrontational group led by CPI M comrade Govind Singh Rawat advocating a forest issue which did not garner as much attention in local media. It was only after the Rainee incident where a team of 28 women under the directions of Gaura Devi, President, Rainee village, stopped the outsider contractors and protected their trees. A deliberate attempt of calling all the men of the entire area for collecting their due payments on the same day to cut down the trees was not an accident but a strategy of the then administration. This entire episode attracted media attention that later brought name and fame to the movement as it was projected in various frames. Although the environmental movement has been considered as an answer to the environmental problems as it gave voice to environment symbolic interaction with human (Peterson, 1998) but Chipko unlike versed in the literature as a symbolic interaction of embracing or hugging trees was not any deemed practiced gesture (of hugging or embracing trees) but an on the spot physical expression to protect the trees by the local mountain dwellers who were dependent on the forests and trees for fulfilling their daily needs.

Unlike mentioned in the various studies that a group of women led by Gaura Devi hugged the trees and put their head between ax and trees or putting herself in front of the gun and much more colorful depiction has no reality in it as their sentiment towards trees and forests was the same though but in practical they destroyed the route from where the lumbermen had to walk and reach the forests. Chipko was a thought, a philosophy, a sentiment, but not a tree-hugging practice to save trees that further helped Rainee village in its development. However, the paper raises this issue to be discussed further.

CONCLUSION:

Started as a peasant movement to a global campaign Chipko movement was never a conservation movement but it was a result of local mountain dwellers' dependency on forests, their limitations in cutting trees and forests, and never the less 'sense of belonging' raised Chipko as 'The Movement' collectively. Chipko has also been considered as the reason behind the making of Uttarakhand a separate State later. Given the background of the data collected, it is obvious that there is a gap between the public understanding of the movement and highly are the chances that Chipko's connotation i.e. 'to cling' or 'embrace' trees has no connection with the tree-hugging practice.

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Captions for Figures:

Fig. 1: ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS AT VARIOUS STAGES OF CHIPKO: (From Left to Right): 1. Sh. Wasvanand Nautiyal, Sh. Kundan Singh, Sh. Hayat Singh Fakriya, Sh. Dilip Singh Kunwar, Sh. Fateh Singh Rawat, Sh. Gaur Singh, Sh. Jagat Singh Rawat, 2. Sh. Govind Singh Rawat Ji, 3. Sh. Chandhi Prasad Bhatt, 4. Sh. Ghanshyam Raturi 'Sailani' 5. Kunwar Prasoon Joshi 6. Smt. Gaura Devi, 7. Sh. Sundar Lal and Smt Vimla Bahuguna 8. Sh. Dhoom Singh Negi Source: Field data, Sangarshnama, <https://slideplayer.com/slide/8640808/>, <http://uttarakhandnews.blogspot.com/2006/07>

Fig. 2: Women who participated during Rainee event Source: Rana, D.S. (2001), Sangarshnama, Laata, Chamoli, Uttarakhand